

Vets Remember life “Over There”

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Olan James Swanner held the tattered newspaper clippings in his hands. The Branford resident was Army Ranger in World War II.

“When I came back, I put all of these clippings away,” he said. “I wanted to forget it all. A lot happened that I wish wouldn’t have.”

Now 60 years since the end of World War II, Swanner is remembering the clippings and the memories that accompany them.

They called me O.J.

After bombing the Pearl Harbor, Swanner left his family in Blountstown, a small Panhandle town, for Camp Blanding.

From there he went to New Orleans and then to England. “I had just turned 18 and I was of the age to be drafted, so I went ahead and volunteered,” he said. “They called me O.J. or just Swanner.”

In his 27 months overseas, he served in every position of his company—the 1st Battalion of Army Rangers, including his platoon leader and sniper. The battalion was trained by the British commandos.

Swanner remembers the 18 day battle of Chiunzi Pass. “We thought it would take about four days,” he said. They seized and mountain cut and held it 18 days until the Allied offensive rolled forward. The Germans attacked the 12 times.

He was wounded three times, being stabbed once and another time falling down a mountain. “I still have a scar on my upper thigh,” he said.

Swanner wouldn’t accept any promotions he was offered. Not even the promise of more money could convince him.

“I dreaded the idea of how I would feel if he had to lead troops into a situation and lose some in the process,” he said. “I would take over leadership if there were an emergency, but I refused all the titles”

Facing the Enemy

Swanner said he respected the Germans, but never trusted them or anyone else.

“One outpost we held was by a big rock as large as a building,” he said. “We were on one side and the Germans were on the other. Some of us knew German and some good Germans could speak good English. Some of the Rangers would sit and talk with them. Later when it was time for the shelling, they shot at one another.”

Swanner also remembers being captured by the Germans. “I respected the Germans because they were good people. They just had a horrible leader,” he said. “The Germans were fighters and they respected you if you stoop up to them. If you were a coward, they would kill you.”

When two fighter planes flew over the German camp, the Germans retreated to their foxholes. Swanner and several of the captured Allied servicemen took the opportunity to flee.

“There were eight of us and we split up to avoid drawing attention,” he said. “I followed irrigation lines at night. I would hear Germans talking in some of the areas I passed. I was terrified.”

Soon Swanner came across an American infantry unit. They were going to kill him at first before they realized he was an American.

“I was in bad shape,” Swanner said.

Coming home

When Swanner arrived home, the scenery looked familiar, but his heart was lost.

“They didn’t debrief you like they do now,” he said. “You were trained to kill a person just like a snake. It became second nature. Then you were dumped back into your regular life. There was no transition and a lot of us had a hard time. We drank. Being sober, brought back too much and we went crazy.” Swanner credits his wife, Alberta, for helping him recover. “She helped me and the good Lord saved me,” he said. But decades later he is still haunted by his experience. “You seem to remember the worst times better than the few good times,” Swanner said. “I remember terrible things as if they were just yesterday.”

Moving Forward

These days, Swanner enjoys spending time with his family. He serves as deacon chairman for Peace Baptist Mission in Branford.

“I served my country, now I am serving the Lord,” he said.

Swanner hopes to meet any of his fellow former Army Rangers from the 1st or 3rd battalions. He asks them to contact him at 386-935-1869